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Captain Cook Wallpaper

TAPESTRY, being the recognized ancestor of all wallpapers, handed down to its less lordly descendants its chief quality, that of being in itself a full and worthy decoration for the wall whereon it hung, whether it gained its end by pleasant woven love-scene or the hunted boar with "frothy mouth bepainted all with red." Though later generations of wallpaper have lost all traces of this quality, serving merely as backgrounds, when the race was young there was a period when their sole purpose was to fulfill the need of a complete wall adornment. These were the Scenic Wallpapers, rich in decorative value, prized for their quaint and curious panoramas. Only a few of these, comparatively, have survived Victorian scrapers and plasters, but of these the Museum has recently received by gift a unique and entrancing specimen. It represents a wide prospect of the Sandwich Islands during the visit of Captain Cook in 1778 and 1779. This same paper is on the walls of the Samuel Ham House, Peabody, Mass., but it was never identified with Captain Cook, being called merely "Tropical Scenery." Miss Kate Sanborn in her book, *Old Time Wallpapers*, so names it, and says that the Ham House was built in 1800, and that the paper was not hung until 1810, but we have reason to believe that the design was made some twenty years before.

Never since the golden age of Drake and Raleigh had the Western World so thrilled to tales of adventure and discovery as when the men who sailed with Captain Cook brought back the story of their Odyssey. England again was stirred, though scarcely so profoundly, by thoughts and pictures of new lands and unknown people. The glamour of romance, however, gathered especially about the new found Hawaiian Group, named by Cook the Sandwich Islands, where the "great and excellent commander," after a fortnight spent amicably among the natives, met his tragic and unnecessary end. The descriptions of the savage customs and tropical surroundings recorded in *The Voyages* were subject indeed for the designer of wallpaper. The "Scenic America" series of Züber, the bucolic prospects and mythological designs of the Italians, the quasi-oriental pageantry of England, all paled before a theme as exotic and alluring as Captain Cook in the Sandwich Islands. And truly the artist did full justice to his subject. Where the travelers' accounts were pictorially meagre, he drew upon an imagination apparently vivid.

We have record of other paper treating of the same subject, proof of its popularity. Miss Sanborn says—"Near Hoosiac Falls, N. Y., there used to be a house whose paper showed Captain Cook's adventures. The scenes were in oval medallions, surrounded and connected by foliage. Different events of the Captain's life were pictured, including the cannibals' feast of which he was the involuntary central figure. This paper has been destroyed by fire but I have seen some chintz of the same pattern saved from a fire in 1790." Our

designer was more tactfully and less martially inclined. Instead of featuring the unfortunate circumstances surrounding the last hours of Cook (though he does portray the death most accurately in a small section of one of the eleven panels) he preferred as his main theme what Burton Holmes might call a glimpse of the idyllic life of the Hawaiians. Here we see the natives building their straw huts; grouped beneath cocoanut or papaia, impaling fish on sticks to dry them in the sun, dandling their children under bananas bowed down with ripening fruit, and in the center of the scene three graceful girls are dancing to the tune of pipe and drum and clapping hands, while a chief, with sacred wand and feathered helmet, looks on approvingly and other of his subjects stand or sit on the flower covered banks. It should be noted that the inhabitants of (the artist's) Hawaii are of two distinct races. One is scarcely dark-skinned, tall and lithe, of almost Grecian grace and carriage; these are the superiors and the chief and dancing girls are of them. The others are small and black and woolly-headed; though they are idle their mien betokens them a servile people. The costumes of all are remarkable. The artist apparently had read with care the descriptions in *The Voyages* and where some article of dress is described in detail there, such as the warriors' feathered helmets or the red cloaks of the priests, these he has portrayed with surprising accuracy. Where he depended upon his imagination the garb becomes fantastic but no less attractive. In his conception, classical was apparently synonymous with savage; toga and tunic, stola and sandals are much in evidence, but here and there a European coif surmounted by a somewhat Turkish turban varies the possible monotony of classicism.

In the central background lies Karakakoa Bay, where are anchored the *Discovery* and the *Resolution*. But the scene depicted here is in marked contrast to the pastoral peacefulness of the foreground. On a promontory jutting into the bay stand the huts of Kowrowa, and from the beach up the slope to the village there is a confused scene of battle; crowds of excited natives armed with bows, spears, and clubs are attacking a handful of Captain Cook's men who are defending themselves with ineffectual musket fire backed by the twelve-pounders on the ships. The surf is filled with boats in which the antagonists are also struggling, while Cook himself stands at the water's edge portrayed as he was last seen. At this moment he was "calling out to the boats to cease firing and pull in. Whilst he faced the natives none of them had offered him any violence, but having turned about to give orders to the boats he was stabbed in the back, and fell with his face into the water." So runs the tale in the words of Captain King, and on the wallpaper there is the intrepid commander with arm outstretched giving his last command and just behind him stands a savage with short spear raised about to plunge it in the Captain's back. The artist chose the dramatic moment for his picture and followed the account of the survivors with pleasing

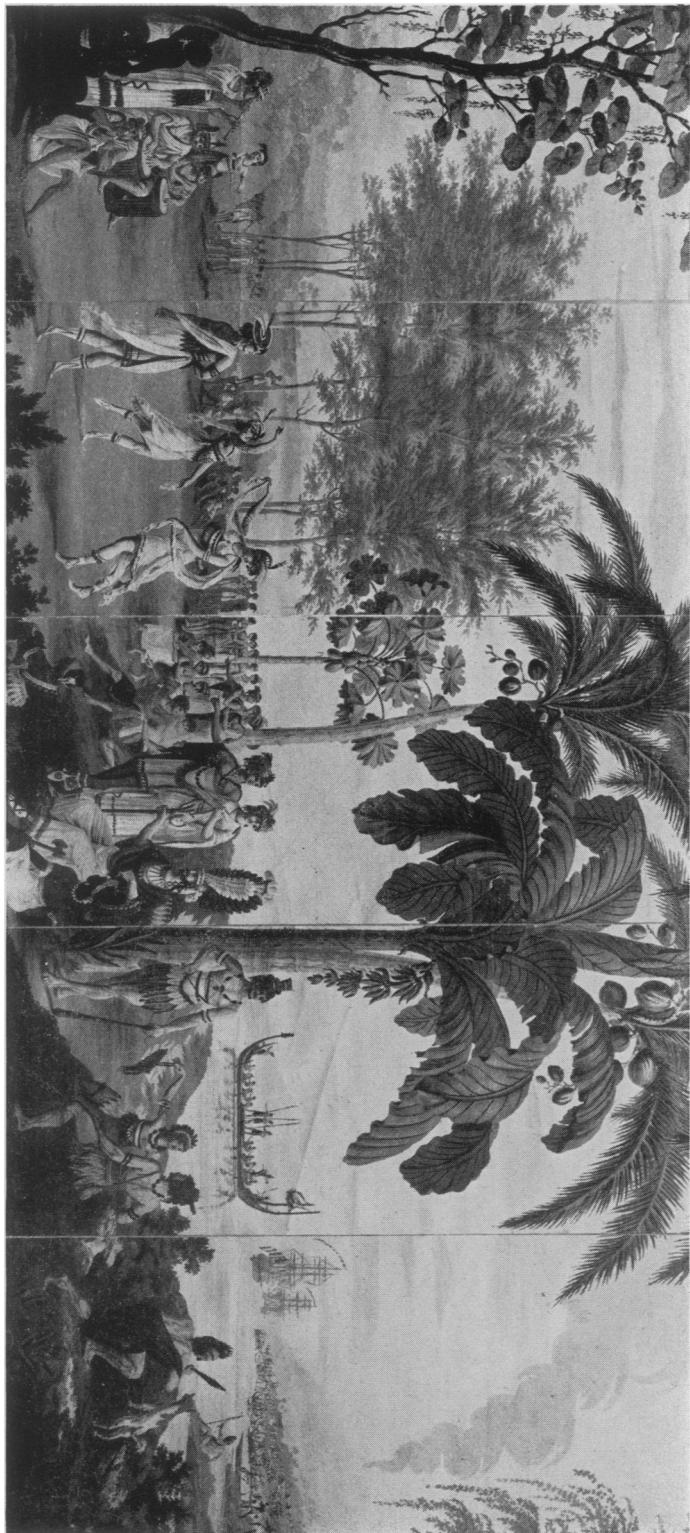
accuracy. We can descry in the enlarged section of the paper reproduced here not only the imminent death of Cook but also higher on the slope the *morai* or temple inclosure, in front of which is the tent that the British pitched for astronomical observations. Over the whole scene hangs a twisted gray smoke cloud issuing sluggishly from the crest of Mauna Loa.

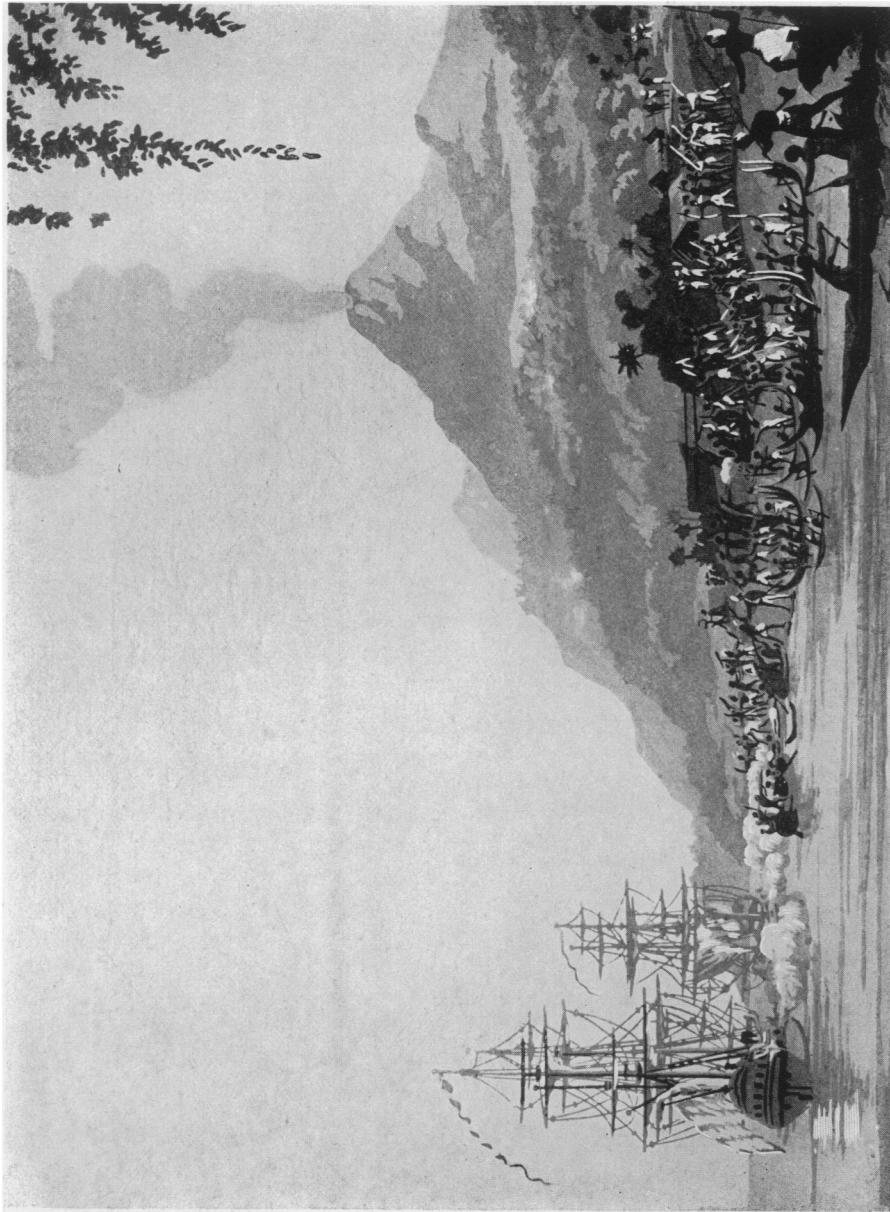
The paper is almost surely of French origin, and may be dated in the last decade of the eighteenth century. The scenic part is in eleven consecutive strips, each about eight feet long, and when fitted together the whole scene is just short of twenty feet wide. In addition there is a dado and a frieze intended to run at the top and the bottom of the scenic strips. Each strip is made up of small squares of paper which were used before full lengths of paper for the purpose could be obtained. It came to the Museum through the generosity of Dr. Anna Mitchell McAllister; her grandmother, wife of John McAllister, the well known engraver and optician, long a notable figure in Philadelphia, was Captain Cook's sister-in-law. Mrs. Cook presented her sister with these rolls, doubtless made with special care, as a remembrance of her association with the Captain, so the pedigree of this gift is in itself interesting.

The entire set is today in as perfect condition as when it was first made. The color blocks were well keyed when the printing was done and the excellence of the drawing, combined with the fresh green of the foliage and the vivid splashes of color in the costumes and the flowers, and the attractive pictorial quality of the whole, makes this wallpaper exceptional, not alone as an example of a vanished style but for its intrinsic charm.

H. H. F. J.

FIVE STRIPS OF EARLY WALLPAPER REPRESENTING SCENES IN THE HAWAIIAN ISLANDS DURING CAPTAIN COOK'S VISIT, 1778 AND 1779





DETAIL OF WALLPAPER, SHOWING THE DEATH OF CAPTAIN COOK